

"The United States will help the people of Cuba realize the blessings of liberty"
President George W. Bush news conference.
Kigali, Rwanda

Q Mr. President, can you tell us what it means for the United States that -- for the U.S. policy, that Castro has said he's going to step down? And how is that going to change things for the U.S.?

PRESIDENT BUSH: Yes, thanks. I heard the reports, several ways -- one, reporters yelling it at me, and then of course I was briefed. Not saying you were yelling it at me; I'm saying --

Q I wouldn't --

PRESIDENT BUSH: -- no, no, of course not, you were very polite. More important -- you know, the question really should be, what does this mean for the people in Cuba? They're the ones who suffered under Fidel Castro. They're the ones who were put in prison because of their beliefs. They're the ones who have been denied their right to live in a free society. So I view this as a period of transition; that -- and it should be the beginning of the democratic transition for the people in Cuba.

There will be an interesting debate that will arise eventually. There will be some who say, let's promote stability. Of course, in the meantime, political prisoners will rot in prison, and the human condition will remain pathetic in many cases.

I believe that the change from Fidel Castro ought to begin a period of democratic transition. First step, of course, will be for people put in these prisons to be let out. I've met with many of the -- or some of the families of prisoners. It just breaks your heart to realize that people have been thrown in prison because they dared speak out.

The international community should work with the Cuban people to begin to build institutions that are necessary for democracy. And eventually, this transition ought to lead to free and fair elections -- and I mean free and I mean fair, not these kind of staged elections that the Castro brothers try to foist off as being true democracy.

And we're going to help -- the United States will help the people of Cuba realize the blessings of liberty. And so those are my initial thoughts.